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Mission (Not) Accomplished: Stanley Kubrick's Paths of Light and Darkness

Abstract

I argue that in his 1957 film *Paths of Glory*, Stanley Kubrick utilized the theological categories of Reinhold Niebuhr's 1944 book with the primary title of *The Children of Light* and the *Children of Darkness*. In so doing, Kubrick used his film as a way to both glance backward at the first half of his century and anticipate its final decades. Kubrick's primary characters embody the full range of Niebuhr's categories, accentuated even more starkly through elements of Kubrick's directorial style. I shall be glad to answer questions that any readers may have.

Toward the end of World War II, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote what became a seminal work in the Western theological world. He argued for a distinction between those he called the children of light and the children of darkness. He wrote:

[w]e may well designate the moral cynics who know no law beyond their will and interest with a scriptural designation of 'children of this world' or 'children of darkness.' Those who believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law could then be termed the 'children of light.'¹

Conflicts can arise within the most intimate of relationships, Niebuhr argues, if either or both sides do not recognize the ongoing power of self-interest.² Without such understanding, the results may reduce civilization to the specter of ants charging up a hill on a landscape pocked by mortar shells and decayed lives.

Stanley Kubrick, while perhaps not knowing Niebuhr's categories, nonetheless exhibits them throughout many of his films, but particularly his World War I adaptation *Paths of Glory*. In his 1957 film, Kubrick does more than maintain the name of his source.³ Perhaps with a sly and brilliant theological nod, Kubrick's film utilizes Niebuhr's distinction to glance backward at the first half of the twentieth century while also anticipating what became its latter portion.

Opening with the "Marseille," the film eerily represents the nationalistic fervor that swept Europe with war's declaration on August 2, 1914. Kubrick pointedly contrasted those sentiments with his opening visual of "France, 1916." The narrator's summary of events presaging the action of the film augments Kubrick's initial distinction. Barely preventing disaster at the First Battle of the Marne, France (and Great Britain) managed to draw the Germans into trench warfare and mutually recurrent charges against one another's well fortified, machine-gun laden, positions.

As the film moves to its action, Kubrick demonstrates his sense of "trench" duality by tracking the entrance of a military vehicle entering a chateau ground turned military headquarters. The vehicle's approach receives heightened notice as a group of soldiers--seen from a noticeable distance--march expertly into formation to greet Corps Commander George Broulard (Adolphe Menjou). He briskly charges through their trench-mimicking formation into the chateau.

The meeting between Broulard and Division Commander General Paul Mireau (George McReady) stands in stark juxtaposition to the trench life of the men under their command. Ostentatious with spacious windows, enormous paintings and a chessboard-like floor, Broulard and Mireau's initial conversation occurred in a room that represented the achievements of an Enlightenment whose purpose culminated in a French Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Niebuhr's categories provide a pointed reading of Kubrick's scene. It presents two French Generals, in other words, reared in the Rights of Man who discuss whether to send men--who possess those same rights--under their command into an all too deadly rain of shot and shell. Niebuhr especially warns that the children of light remain more likely to issue such orders "not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness (but rather that) they underestimate this power among themselves."⁴ Surrounded by the glory of civilization, Mireau seems to genuinely resist Broulard's initial enticements to send his division against the virtually impregnable German Ant Hill. As Mireau listens to Broulard, however, Kubrick presents him as never believing that--in Niebuhr's words--"the same man who is ostensibly devoted to 'the common good' may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbors."⁵ General Broulard, conversely, knew exactly the man he faced in General Mireau.

Broulard, exhibiting classic child of darkness cynicism, guides Mireau toward visions of a successful attack and an all but guaranteed promotion. The fruit of Eden, in other words, stood right in front of Mireau's eyes. Like his Edenic predecessors, Mireau falls into an abyss that leads to disastrous consequences. Unlike those in Eden, however, Mireau's fall does not bring any immediate disaster directly upon himself. Only those under his command, the men whom Mireau

claimed to place first as he made decisions, will come to bear the mark of separation.

While Mireau certainly believed his homily about the importance of "the men," Broulard recognized, in Niebuhr's terms, that such child of light idealism does not center itself at the core of human hearts. Ambition, desire and lust for power--self-interest--remain the principle forces of "realistic" human behavior. Mireau realizes that army-wide appreciation for taking the Ant Hill would conceivably result in not only a promotion, advancement and possibly endless other accoutrements of "success." Unfortunately, Mireau's visions of battlefield glory prevent him from seeing any other possible outcome.

By the end of their scene, Broulard had Mireau, in terms applicable to World War I, "digging the trench" of his own destruction. The outcome of the charge did not matter to Broulard. Kubrick makes clear that some unseen powers are manipulating the meeting and the forthcoming attack for unspecified reasons. As he well understands, Broulard stands as their emissary and does so with a cynical, calculating acquiescence.

Once to his task, however, Mireau behaves as if he never expressed a hesitant moment. Kubrick's camera leads Mireau toward a meeting with Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas), whose brigade will lead the seemingly preordained assault.

Mireau seems literally to bounce in his step, oblivious to the slowly carried stretchers bearing wounded men towards a field hospital. With a bursting of self-confidence juxtaposed to the "bursting" of shells all around him, Mireau walks as a man wholly dedicated to his mission.

Mireau's confident oblivion--or innocence--places him squarely as a child of light. Such confidence and idealism, however, also leads to a blinding arrogance. Through these shots, Kubrick makes clear that Mireau cannot grasp how anyone who loves France--or presumably "liberty, equality and fraternity"--can envision another option beyond the one between Dax's trenches and the Ant Hill. Kubrick poignantly suggests an irony, in other words, that Mireau's blindness will bring a charge across No Man's Land and leave very few to either see or enjoy the "fruits" of their "enlightened" civilization.

In his meeting with Dax, however, Mireau encounters a soldier whose patriotism and idealism leads him to see quite differently. Dax's quote of Samuel Johnson that "patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels" expresses an idea that Mireau's arrogance allows him to neither hear nor consider. Dax understands how self-interest rather than the love of one's country or--in recent terms--the "support" of one's troops can all too easily corrupt even the best of patriotism. Dax reminds Mireau of the several previous attempts to capture the Ant Hill, each resulting in useless loss of brave, patriotic men. Mireau, ever self-confident, explodes in rage,

coercing Dax to reluctantly order Lieutenant Roget (Wayne Morris) to ascertain the extent of German defenses. Kubrick seems to implant the notion that many such missions have already occurred--with all too predictable results to follow.

Roget's choice of a childhood acquaintance, Corporal Philip Paris (Ralph Meeker), to assist with his nighttime reconnaissance mission comes to suggest that the distinction between light and darkness does not solely fall upon those in powerful positions. Paris knows Roget to live only for himself, exhibiting a cowardice that proves as dangerous as the arrogance of Broulard and Mireau. While contrasting the General's clinking champagne glasses to the soldier's crawling in mud, it remains possible to understand Kubrick's presentation as representative of Niebuhr's categories.⁶ No one, Kubrick suggests, even men in the trenches whose shared combat experience might theoretically create some common bond, can escape the lure of self-interest. Conversely, Mireau's child of light innocence can understand neither Broulard's amoral darkness, Dax's "wise as serpents, gentle as doves" realism nor even a basic compassion for a shell-shocked infantryman

Once the attack inevitably fails, Mireau--ever the child of light--demands satisfaction through scapegoats. Paris, also a child of light, stands incredulous when Roget chooses him as a scapegoat in the "cowardice" during the failed attack against the Ant Hill. While knowing Roget as only self-serving, Paris' innate decency prevents him from fully grasping the depth of Roget's insipid "child of

darkness” cynicism. In Kubrick's specific linkage, however, Roget, like Broulard before and "above” him, knew exactly what he was doing.

As the film marches toward its climax, Kubrick arguably presents almost two films at once. Each arguably contains a metaphysical vision in direct competition with an "enemy” it confronts across a No Man's Lands of wasted Enlightenment. In Dax's impassioned defense of Paris as well as Privates Arnaud (Joe Turkel) and Ferol (Timothy Carey), Kubrick suggests that one vision stands on the ground of large, cosmic forces who all too easily manipulate every level of human relationships. As each soldier approaches a very isolated chair in which to testify, he marches in stark, cutting military manner across the shining tile floor. Paris, Arnaud and Ferel each sit perfectly straight, but remain pointedly alone, facing their inquisitors who clearly steer the proceedings toward a preordained verdict. Even Dax, usually wise in his gentleness, did not anticipate such a scenario. Believing that one Right of Man rests on having a fair trial, he originally argued in the hope of actual acquittal. As the hearing developed, however, Dax came to realize the limitlessness, in Niebuhr's terms, of cynical indifference to which the children of darkness will reach to achieve their objectives. Even his halo-lit closing summation that thunders with Sermon on the Mount righteousness seems only to play out its role in the immutable script.

Kubrick's second vision, however ephemeral and often futile, actually comes to rest on Dax's "Sermon." Every soldier, from Private to General, possesses the Rights of Man proclaimed by the Enlightenment. Dax argues--to use Niebuhr's categories--that self-interest does not stand solely upon rank in a military or cultural hierarchy. Creating scapegoats will not, as it were, "wipe away the sins" of either the French Army or European civilization. Rather, the trials of Paris, Arnaud and Turkel only contribute to the destruction of what France represented as late as August 1, 1914.

Kubrick's film suggests, in other words, that perhaps unlike Dax prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Broulard and his unseen superiors--as well as Roget and what he represents--have utterly no pretense about having a war to end all wars or bringing peace on earth. Broulard, Roget and the children of darkness conduct themselves as if to say, "Of course, I am being manipulated. So is everyone else. But I realize it and I'm going to maneuver for advantage as long as I can without either qualm or reluctance." Notions of "the right thing," as Broulard and Roget easily understand, stand as nothing more than the disastrous idealism that helped to create trench warfare and show trials in the first place.

While Kubrick's universe contains little room for more than just a glance at muted redemption, Niebuhr's categories suggest that Dax and the children of light can successfully mitigate the cynicism of their darker siblings. By developing the

skills of "being as wise as serpents" while remaining "as gentle as doves," Niebuhr argues that the Children of Light can understand the ways in which their siblings tend to outthink themselves.⁷ Broulard's shock that Dax's passion rested not in lust for Mireau's command, but selfless devotion to his men indicates a momentary breach in his cynicism. Dax insists that something beyond either blind ambition or cold indifference lies at the heart of the universe. By presenting Broulard with papers that detail Mireau's violation of military protocol, Dax affirms Kubrick's hope--and Niebuhr's faith--that even the coldest of human beings remains capable at least of partial conversion.

Kubrick's film, given its 1957 release, arguably presents a similar glance backward and gaze forward that Niebuhr provides with his 1944 book.* World War I, as Kubrick's title suggests with painful irony, did not offer paths to Enlightenment glory, but avenues to decades of megadeath. In so doing, the war laid the path straight toward Auschwitz, Hiroshima and, using a reference from perhaps Kubrick's most famous film, *Dr. Strangelove*. Neither Kubrick nor Niebuhr, however, place primary blame for megadeath on the children of darkness. Through idealism dangerously grounded in an innocence, Mireau and his descendant children of light stand at the pinnacle of culpability. As Kubrick's film clearly implies, if Mireau had possessed even a notion of Broulard's indifference, the Ant Hill charge and its consequences might have been avoided. If, as Niebuhr puts it,

the warring individual and collective children of light had even a small awareness of Nazi aspirations, Hitler's ability to play democratic factions against one another might have been averted.⁸

The danger of innocence, Kubrick and Niebuhr warn, remains the partaken fruit of the twentieth century. Mireau's insistence that he endured the most harm in the Ant Hill affair strikingly portrays the past and present consequences of that innocence. From the Marne to "Mission Accomplished," those warnings continue to go mostly--and tragically-- unheeded.

* As clearly indicated inside the book cover, Niebuhr's work was published in 1944. My edition, however, lists its specific publication year as 1953. Indications of second or later printing did not appear to be provided. I chose to refer to both dates as seemed appropriate throughout the text and citation notes. I apologize for any confusion the reader may have incurred as a result.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944) 9.

² Ibid 10.

³ James Howard, *Stanley Kubrick Companion* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1999) 55.

⁴ Niebuhr 11.

⁵ Ibid 11.

⁶ Matthew 16: 10, New Revised Standard Version (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible, 1989).

⁷ Niebuhr 12; 18.

⁸ Ibid 6.

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